

Shipbuilding was a big industry here in the late 1800s

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Today, Green Bay is recognized as one of Wisconsin's largest ports. The fact that shipbuilding once was a major industry here is not so well known.

While much of that history has been lost, the story of one company, Johnson Shipbuilders has been preserved. The company was founded by Andrew Johnson Sr. and his son Andrew Jr. in 1876 on Water Street, near the Walnut Street bridge. Immigrants from Norway, the Johnsons came first to Oshkosh in 1870. Later they joined many other Norwegian shipbuilders and sailors who already had settled in the Fort Howard/Green Bay area.

The first vessel known to have been built at the Johnson yard was the steamer Welcome. It was constructed in 1878 for the Hart Transportation Co. of Green Bay. A 100-foot side-wheel steamer, it had the distinction of being the first large vessel to pass through the Sturgeon Bay Ship Canal.

In 1880, the Johnsons constructed the steamer W.L. Brown. It was built using the burnt hull of the Neptune, which caught fire at

East Saginaw, Mich., in 1874. It was 140 feet in length.

The only other two vessels that can positively be identified as having been built in the Johnson Shipyard in Fort Howard were the John Denessen, a 75-foot tugboat, and the Nettie Denessen, an 84-foot steamer. As the business grew, the company expanded into motorboats, lake steamers, schooners, tugboats and rowboats.

By the 1890s, the Water Street shipyard proved inadequate for the Johnsons' growing business. In approximately 1889 they purchased a piece of property on the east shore of the Fox River near Grignon Street. The Johnson family also purchased a house at 1222 S. Monroe St.

In 1899, Andrew Johnson Sr. died as the result of an accident in the yard. As a result, Arthur Johnson, born in 1881, joined the business, which was now called Andrew A. Johnson & Shipyard.

By the turn of the century, the shipyard was approximately the size of a city block. A shop was erected on the north side of the yard to construct small boats during



Throughout this year of Wisconsin's Sesquicentennial celebration, the Press-Gazette will publish a series of stories on local history. This feature, prepared with the assistance of the Brown County Historical Society, will appear on Mondays.



the winter.

Arthur Johnson's wife, Anna, at age 102 in 1984, recalled her husband's shipyard. "I sewed a lot of sails. I used a sewing machine for some and for some I used my hands. I didn't care very

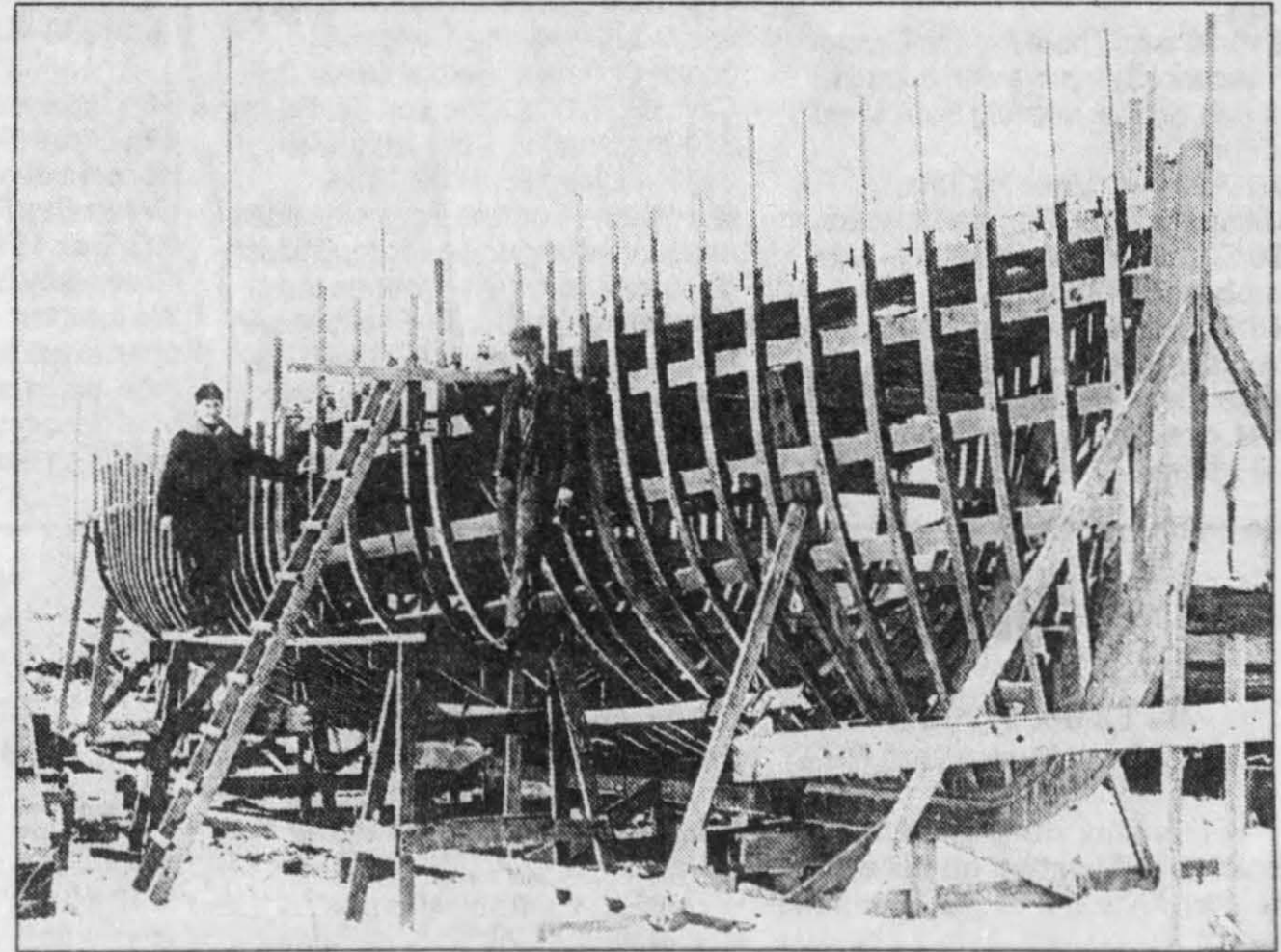
much for it because it was heavy work."

After the turn of the century, different types of vessels were constructed in the Johnson shipyard. Large commercial vessels and passenger ships were built of

steel. Andrew and his son, Arthur, now built tugboats, cabin cruisers, and launches, although they still built several small lake steamers.

Andrew and Arthur Johnson also operated another business. They purchased

an old fishing boat and converted it into a tugboat, which they christened the Harvey Watson. The Watson was used to tow a sandsuck-



Manitowoc Maritime Museum

E. Verier, left, and Arthur Johnson pose next to the Wisconsin as it's being built in 1916. Verier was owner of the boat.

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er scow the Johnsons had built. Onboard the scow was a gasoline-powered dredge. With this equipment, the father and son went out to the sandbars in Green Bay to obtain "fill." The Johnsons provided fill for the municipal docks, and also for the Joannes building in downtown Green Bay.

The business became so successful after the turn of the century that 30 men were employed. They worked six days a week from daylight until dark.

In 1917 hard times befell the Johnson Shipyard when Andrew A. Johnson died of a stroke. He was 74. His son, Arthur, continued to operate the yard, and business picked up after World War I.

In 1921 an accident led to the end of the Johnson Shipyard. The Isle de Luzon, a seaplane, was brought to the yard for repairs. While repairing the seaplane, Arthur Johnson scratched his hand and contracted blood poisoning. Three weeks later he died at the age of 40.

Arthur Johnson's children were too young to carry on the business. Some of the boats that wintered at the yard were already stored on the grounds. However, there was no one to look after them during the winter of 1921-1922, and several were damaged.

Anna sold the house and the shipyard. The yard was purchased by an engineering company and vessels were no longer built or repaired on the property. Arthur Johnson's oldest son, Stanley Johnson of Suamico, later carried on the association with ships begun by his great-grandfather in 1870. He became an electrician and worked on

Navy vessels constructed in Sturgeon Bay during World War II.

Condensed by Bonnie Vastag

from an article by Isacco A. Valli originally published by Voyager magazine.